

Practice Makes...Pain?

At 10, Courtney Thompson was a top-ranked gymnast in New Hampshire. She had been doing flips since she was one year old, and she had her heart set on competing in the Olympics. She practiced four and a half hours a day, six days a week, often repeating the same move 100 times.

Her demanding schedule took a toll. It got to the point where Courtney could barely straighten her elbows unless she put ice on them. On Jan. 12, 2005, she had to stop in the middle of a floor routine. "I jumped up and grabbed my arm," she told *Senior Edition*. "It hurt wicked bad."

Doctors discovered that Courtney's constant workouts had caused the **cartilage**, or connective tissue, in her elbow to separate from the bone. She had surgery on both arms and endured months of painful rehabilitation.

Courtney's experience is part of a growing trend in youth sports—severe injuries, once limited to professional athletes, are now showing up in kids and teens.

"We're starting to see 12-year-old kids look like 40- and 50-year-olds in terms of stress on their bodies," Roch King, a kids' volleyball coach, told reporters.

Experts say kids are pushing their bodies to the limit, practicing sports too hard for too long. The **strenuous**¹ schedules often lead to dangerous injuries that could leave young athletes on the sidelines—permanently.

Under Strain

From 30 percent to 50 percent of youth sports injuries are due to overuse, according to experts at *The Physician and Sportsmedicine Journal*. **Overuse injuries** are caused by repetitive motion that, over time, puts more stress on a body part than it can withstand. The tissue or bone eventually breaks, stretches, or tears.

¹ **strenuous**: showing or requiring great energy

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Danny Clark ended up with an overuse injury last year. The teen baseball player from Altamonte Springs, Florida, hurt himself by throwing 80 pitches in a single game after two months of not pitching at all.

The sudden, repetitive action tore Danny's **rotator cuff**. The rotator cuff is a group of four muscles and the tendons that connect them to bones in the shoulder. Afterward, he couldn't pitch for two months and needed five months of physical therapy.

Too Much, Too Soon

Experts say injuries such as Danny's are on the rise, in part because more and more kids are abandoning casual sports for organized team competitions that require hours of practice and game time. "Kids [are] playing sports more aggressively at younger ages," explains James Beaty, an **orthopedist**² in Memphis, Tennessee.

Kevin Butcher, a 15-year-old soccer player from Fort Collins, Colorado, is no exception. He plays soccer three or four times a week for nine months a year. His dedication pays off—last year he helped lead his team to a state championship. But his success came with a price.

"Last year, I sprained my ankle a few times, dislocated a bone in my foot, and broke both sides of my pelvis," Kevin told *Senior Edition*. The first time he broke his pelvis, Kevin didn't realize it for about a month. He played through the pain until doctors forced him to rest. When he dislocated a bone in his foot, a physical therapist popped the bone into place, bandaged his foot, and let him play the next day.

Knowing Your Limits

Not every kid who plays sports ends up with serious injuries. Experts say the key to avoiding injury is paying attention to your body. Feeling sore after practice is OK, but sharp pain is a warning sign that shouldn't be ignored.

2 **orthopedist**: a doctor who deals with the correction or prevention of deformities, disorders, or injuries of the skeleton (bones) and closely associated structures such as tendons and ligaments

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Kevin learned that lesson while recovering from his second broken pelvis in less than a year. "There's definitely a glory in playing through pain, but I think there is a limit," he told *Senior Edition*. "You just have to know when to stop."

How to Stay Safe

Playing sports doesn't have to lead to injury. Here's how to stay in the game:

- Limit the time you spend playing a sport—no more than 15 hours a week.
- Increase the length and intensity of your training slowly. Never add more than 10 percent a week. If you ran for 20 minutes last week, you can run 22 minutes this week.
- Take a couple of days off from workouts every week.
- Consider *cross-training*, competing for fun in a variety of sports, to even out the stresses on your body.